Meeting Minutes
Virginia Board of Education
Committee on the Lowest Performing School Systems

Tuesday, January 11, 2005

Mr. Mark Emblidge, chairman of the committee, opened the meeting. Committee members present were, Mr. Tom Jackson, Mr. David Johnson and Dr. Gary Jones. Other Board of Education members in attendance were Mrs. Isis Castro, Mrs. Eleanor Saslaw, and Dr. Ella Ward. Dr. Jo Lynne DeMary was also present.

Presentations were made by three firms that specialize in meeting the needs of low-performing schools and those students with the greatest needs. James Dyke, representing the Edison Project, was the first presenter.

Staff from the Edison Project presented a broad overview of their organization and the services that it provides. The importance of offering technology support, professional development, and assessment was emphasized. The Edison Project does most of its work with school districts that are looking to raise student achievement. The Edison Project has served 265 schools in 20 states and in two foreign countries. The organization has worked with large, urban school districts, with mid-size school districts, and in suburbs and towns. Staff from the Edison Projects cited examples of working with the three lowest-performing schools in Maryland and partnering with the city of Philadelphia to raise achievement in 20 schools. The Philadelphia schools have seen an 11% gain in student proficiency.

In order to turnaround low-performing schools, the Edison Project partners with states and/or local school divisions not only to address immediate needs but to build school capacity to continue programs developed during the partnership (which is for a five-year period) after the partnerships agreements are no longer in place. The process for turnaround involves the following steps: 1) a school joint diagnostic study; 2) an achievement program implementation process; and 3) a process of sustaining school improvement. The Edison Project provides a formal program to develop principals and school leadership teams.

At the conclusion of the Edison Project overview, Mr. Dyke emphasized that the organization provides a unique level of expertise. He also suggested that it might be worthwhile to consider having the department in the future provide school divisions with financial assistance in the form of a match to local Title I federal monies used for low-performing school intervention strategies.

Mr. Johnson asked about the contract commitment that the Edison Project makes with its partners. Staff of the Edison Project responded that the commitment is typically three to five years. Ms. Saslaw followed up by asking whether there were cases where the partnership had been extended for more than five years. The response was that the support is continuous and there have been many cases where school districts have renewed their contracts with the Edison Project.

Dr. Ward asked if it was possible to change the leadership in a low-performing school. The response was that the Edison Projects works with local school division to achieve this step, if necessary. Ms. Castro asked about parent involvement in the process, to which the Edison Project responded that this was crucial part of making intervention strategies work.

Dr. Kirk Schroder and Dr. Barbara Braman, representing Community Education Partners (CEP) provided information on this organization's program to the committee. Dr. Schroder emphasized CEP's role in getting children back on track and how CEP targets a specific population of students, those who need alternative education. He also pointed out the CEP works with students who have the most dire educational circumstances and mentioned the Capital City program, which is a five-year contract with Richmond City.

Dr. Braman discussed CEP's program, which is a behavioral and intervention program targeting the school- age population, up to sixteen. School districts make decisions concerning which students should attend a CEP school. CEP provides for the school facilities and the staff, who are prepared to work with a truant population of students. The goal of a CEP school is to prepare students for the return to a school division. Attendance at a CEP school can be for up to 182 days. Results have shown that 84% of the CEP students are back on track once they return to a school within the school district.

Dr. Ward asked about the average length of time that a student attends a CEP school. Dr. Braman responded that the average length was 182 days, or a year and a half. Dr. Braman also pointed out that a CEP school has a 1:20 teacher/student ratio.

Mrs. Castro asked about the support mechanism available to students once they return to the school division. Dr. Braman responded that CEP ensures that a transition coordinator is available to work with the school district.

Mr. Goodman asked about the qualifications of CEP teachers. The response was that CEP teachers have typically taught at private or sometimes public schools or may have experience teaching within a correctional system. There are also cases where retired military have become teachers at CEP schools. There are also cases where special education students are in CEP schools as part of the their individualized education program.

Dr. Schroder pointed out that school boards need to implement policies concerning referrals to CEP schools.

There was a question regarding how CEP students can continue to receive positive reinforcement when they are labeled in their school districts as 'disruptive.' Mr. Emblidge asked how CEP students are assessed for achievement in areas such as reading. Dr. Braman responded that each student receives an independent assessment in reading and math.

Dr. DeMary asked if CEP had any circumstances that it was not able to address when working with a school district. Dr. Braman responded that a CEP school is not designed for the very young student and that there were some special education needs that cannot be accommodated in a CEP program.

Dr. Brenda Drew provided an overview of the work done by Mosaica Education. Mr. Michael Connelly (also representing Mosaica) indicated that Mosaica provides whole-school management, tutoring services, and curriculum support. A Mocasic school typically offers a longer school day (7.5 hours), a 200-day school year, and a full-day kindergarten. The school integrates the use of technology and teaches using its Paragon curriculum©. It also provides: 1) assessment through standard testing; 2) quality educational leaders/teachers; 3) parent and community involvement; and 4) other services such as special education and central office management. Throughout the country, Mosaica has served 11,000 students and has shown that its schools have a better than 17% increase in student achievement over schools in a school division. According to Mr. Connelly, most Mosaica schools have waiting lists. He also pointed out that Mosaica Education took over the Arts and Technology Academic in Washington, D.C. At the present time, Mosaica runs 43 charter schools, mainly in inner city neighborhoods.

Dr. DeMary asked about what drives the Paragon curriculum©. The response was that it is a five-week curriculum that contains essential questions. These questions are aligned with state standards. Dr. DeMary also asked how the 17% figure (the rate at which Mosaica students are above the school district schools) is derived. The response was that a norm-referenced test is used.

Dr. DeMary also asked how the curriculum and testing were correlated at Mosaica schools. Mr. Connelly responded that the Paragon curriculum© is predicated upon a humanities base and there is a correlation between the norm-referenced tests and state tests. The Paragon curriculum© is intended to supplement the state curriculum.

Mr. Emblidge asked what percent of Mosaica schools were considered low-performing. The response was that most schools were considered 'start-up' schools. The Mosaica students are typically in districts with high-free lunch factors.

The three presenters each made concluding remarks, following by Mr. Jackson and then by Mr. Emblidge.